

LANGUAGE AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

CHAPTER

I



An Introduction

The English language has had a remarkable history. When we first catch sight of it in historical records, it is the **speech** of some none-too-civilized tribes on the continent of Europe along the North Sea. Of course, it had a still earlier history, going back perhaps to somewhere in eastern Europe or western Asia, and long before that to origins we can only speculate about. From those murky and undistinguished beginnings, English has become the most widespread language in the world, used by more peoples for more purposes than any other language on Earth. How the English language changed from being the speech of a few small tribes to becoming the major language of the Earth—and in the process itself changed radically—is the subject of this book.

Whatever language we speak—English, Chinese, Hindi, Swahili, or Arapaho—helps to define us personally and identify the community we belong to. But the fact that we can talk at all, the fact that we have a language, is inextricably bound up with our humanity. To be human is to use language, and to talk is to be a person. As the biologist and author Lewis Thomas wrote:

The gift of language is the single human trait that marks us all genetically, setting us apart from the rest of life. Language is, like nest-building or hive-making, the universal and biologically specific activity of human beings. We engage in it communally, compulsively, and automatically. We cannot be human without it; if we were to be separated from it our minds would die, as surely as bees lost from the hive.

(Lives of a Cell 89)

The language gift that is innate in us is not English or indeed any specific language. It is instead the ability to learn and to use a human language. When we say, “Bread is the staff of life,” we do not mean any particular kind of bread—whole wheat, rye, pumpernickel, French, matzo, pita, or whatever sort. We are talking instead about the kind of thing bread is, what all bread has in common. So also, when we say that language is the basis of our humanity, we do not mean any particular language—English, Spanish, Japanese, Tagalog, Hopi, or **ASL** (American Sign Language of the deaf). Rather we mean the ability to learn and

use any such particular language system, an ability that all human beings naturally have. This ability is language in the abstract, as distinct from any individual language system.

A DEFINITION OF LANGUAGE

A **language** is a system of conventional vocal signs by means of which human beings communicate. This definition has several important terms, each of which is examined in some detail in the following sections. Those terms are *system*, *signs*, *vocal*, *conventional*, *human*, and *communicate*.

LANGUAGE AS SYSTEM

Perhaps the most important word in the definition of *language* is **system**. We speak in patterns. A language is not just a collection of words, such as we find in a dictionary. It is also the rules or patterns that relate our words to one another.

Every language has two levels to its system—a characteristic that is called **duality of patterning**. One of these levels consists of meaningful units—for example, the words and word parts such as *Adam*, *like*, *-d*, *apple*, and *-s* in the sentence “Adam liked apples.” The other level consists of units that have no meaning in themselves, although they serve as components of the meaningful units—for example, the sounds represented by the letters *a*, *d*, and *m* in the word *Adam*.

The distinction between a meaningful word (*Adam*) and its meaningless parts (*a*, *d*, and *m*) is important. Without that distinction, language as we know it would be impossible. If every meaning had to be represented by a unique, unanalyzable sound, only a few such meanings could be expressed. We have only about 35 basic sounds in English; we have hundreds of thousands of words. Duality of patterning lets us build an immensely large number of meaningful words out of only a handful of meaningless sounds. It is perhaps the chief characteristic that distinguishes true human language from the simpler communication systems of all non-human animals.

The meaningless components of a language are its **sound system**, or **phonology**. The meaningful units are its **lexis**, or **vocabulary**, and its **grammatical system**, or **morphosyntax**. All have patterning. Thus, according to the sound system of Modern English, the consonant combination *mb* never occurs at the beginning or at the end of any word. As a matter of fact, it did occur in final position in earlier stages of our language, which is why it was necessary in the preceding statement to specify “Modern English.” Despite the complete absence of the sounds *mb* at the ends of English words for at least 600 years, we still insist on writing—such is the conservatism of writing habits—the *b* in *lamb*, *climb*, *tomb*, *dumb*, and a number of other words. But this same combination, which now occurs only medially in English (as in *tremble*), may well occur finally or even initially in other languages. Initial *mb* is indeed a part of the systems of certain African languages, as in Efik and Ibibio *mbakara* ‘white man,’ which became *buckra* in the speech of the Gullahs—black Americans living along the coastal region of Georgia and South Carolina who have preserved a number of words and structural features that their ancestors brought from Africa. It is notable that the Gullahs simplified the initial

consonant combination of this African word to conform to the pattern of English speech.

The lexis or vocabulary of a language is its least systematic aspect. Grammar is sometimes defined as everything in a language that can be stated in general rules, and lexis as everything that is unpredictable. But that is not quite true. Certain combinations of words, called **collocations**, are more or less predictable. *Mild* and *gentle* are words of very similar meaning, but they go with different nouns: “mild weather” and “gentle breeze” are somewhat more likely than the opposite combinations (“mild breeze” and “gentle weather”). A case of the flu may be *severe* or *mild*; a judgment is likely to be *severe* or *lenient*. A “mild judgment” would be a bit odd, and a “lenient case of the flu” sounds like a joke. Some collocations are so regular that they are easily predictable. In the following sentence, one word is more probable than any other in the blank: “In its narrow cage, the lion paced back and _____.” Although several words are possible in the blank (for example, *forward* or even *ahead*), *forth* is the most likely. Some combinations are completely predictable: “They ran ____ ____ fro.” *Fro* is normal in present-day English only in the expression “to and fro.” The tendency of certain words to collocate or go together is an instance of system in the vocabulary.

In the grammatical system of English, a very large number of words take a suffix written as -s to indicate plurality or possession. In the latter case, it is a comparatively recent convention of writing to add an apostrophe. Words that can be thus modified are nouns. They fit into certain patterns in English utterances. *Alcoholic*, for instance, fits into the system of English in the same way as *duck*, *dog*, and *horse*: “Alcoholics need understanding” (compare “Ducks need water”), “An alcoholic’s perceptions are faulty” (compare “A dog’s perceptions are keen”), and the like. But that word can also modify a noun and be modified by an adverb: “an alcoholic drink,” “somewhat alcoholic,” and the like; and words that operate in the latter way are called adjectives. *Alcoholic* is thus either an adjective or a noun, depending on the way it functions in the system of English. The utterance “Alcoholic worries” is ambiguous because our system, like all linguistic systems, is not completely foolproof. It might be either a noun followed by a verb (in a newspaper headline) or an adjective followed by a noun. To know which interpretation is correct, we need a context for the expression. That is, we need to relate it to a larger structure.

GRAMMATICAL SIGNALS

The grammatical system of any language has various techniques for relating words to one another within the structure of a sentence. The following kinds of signals are especially important.

- **Parts of speech** are grammatical categories into which we can classify words. The four major ones are **noun**, **verb**, **adjective**, and **adverb**. Some words belong primarily or solely to one part of speech: *child* is a noun, *seek* is a verb, *tall* is an adjective, and *rapidly* is an adverb. Other words can function as more than one part of speech; in various meanings, *last* can be any of the four major parts. English speakers move words about pretty freely from one part of speech to another, as when we call a book that is enjoyable to read “a good read,”

making a noun out of a verb. Part of knowing English is knowing how words can be shifted in that way and what the limits are to such shifting.

- **Affixes** are one or more added sounds or letters that change a word's meaning and sometimes alter its part of speech. When an affix comes at the front of a word, it is a **prefix**, such as the *en-* in *encipher*, *enrage*, *enthrone*, *entomb*, *entwine*, and *enwrap*, which marks those words as verbs. When an affix comes at the back of a word, it is a **suffix**, such as the *-ist* in *dentist*, *geologist*, *motorist*, and *violinist*, which marks those words as nouns. English has a small number of **inflectional suffixes** (endings that mark distinctions of number, case, person, tense, mood, and comparison). They include the plural *-s* and the possessive *'s* used with nouns (*boys*, *boy's*); the third person singular present tense *-s*, the past tense and past participle *-ed*, and the present participle *-ing* used with verbs (*aids*, *aided*, *aiding*); and the comparative *-er* and superlative *-est* used with some adjectives and adverbs (*slower*, *slowest*). **Inflection** (the change in form of a word to mark such distinctions) may also involve internal change, as in the singular and plural noun forms *man* and *men* or the present and past verb forms *sing* and *sang*. A language that depends heavily on the use of inflections, either internal or affixed, is said to be **synthetic**; English used to be far more synthetic than it now is.
- **Concord**, or **agreement**, is an interconnection between words, especially marked by their inflections. Thus, "The bird sings" and "The birds sing" illustrate subject-verb concord. (It is just a coincidence that the singular ending of some verbs is identical in form with the plural ending of some nouns.) Similarly, in "this day" both words are singular, and in "these days" both are plural; some languages, such as Spanish, require that all modifiers agree with the nouns they modify in number, but in English only *this* and *that* change their form to show such agreement. Highly synthetic languages, such as Latin, usually have a great deal of concord; thus Latin adjectives agree with the nouns they modify in number (*bonus vir* 'good man,' *boni viri* 'good men'), in gender (*bona femina* 'good woman'), and in case (*bonae feminae* 'good woman's'). English once used concord more than it now does.
- **Word order** is a grammatical signal in all languages, though some languages, like English, depend more heavily on it than others do. "The man finished the job" and "The job finished the man" are sharply different in meaning, as are "He died happily" and "Happily he died."
- **Function words** are minor parts of speech (for example, articles, auxiliaries, conjunctions, prepositions, pronouns, and certain adverbial particles) that serve as grammatical signals used with word order to serve some of the same functions as inflections. For example, in English the indirect object of a verb can be shown by either word order ("I gave *the dog* a bone") or a function word ("I gave a bone *to the dog*"); in Latin it is shown by inflection (*canis* 'the dog,' *Canī os dēdi* 'To-the-dog a-bone I-gave'). A language like English whose grammar depends heavily on the use of word order and function words is said to be **analytic**.
- **Prosodic signals**, such as pitch, stress, and tempo, can indicate grammatical meaning. The difference between the statement "He's here" and the question

“He’s here?” is the pitch used at the end of the sentence. The chief difference between the verb *conduct* and the noun *conduct* is that the verb has a stronger stress on its second syllable and the noun on its first syllable. In “He died happily” and “He died, happily,” the tempo of the last two words makes an important difference of meaning.

All languages have these kinds of grammatical signals available to them, but languages differ greatly in the use they make of the various signals. And even a single language may change its use over time, as English has.

LANGUAGE AS SIGNS

In language, signs are what the system organizes. A **sign** is something that stands for something else—for example, a word like *apple*, which stands for the familiar fruit. But linguistic signs are not words alone; they may also be either smaller or larger than whole words. The smallest linguistic sign is the **morpheme**, a meaningful form that cannot be divided into smaller meaningful parts. The word *apple* is a single morpheme; *applejack* consists of two morphemes, each of which can also function independently as a word. *Apples* also has two morphemes, but one (-s) can occur only as part of a word. Morphemes that can be used alone as words (such as *apple* and *jack*) are called **free morphemes**. Those that must be combined with other morphemes to make a word (such as -s) are **bound morphemes**. The word *reactivation* has five morphemes in it (one free and four bound), as a step-by-step analysis shows:

re-activation
activate-ion
active-ate
act-ive

Thus *reactivation* has one free morpheme (*act*) and four bound morphemes (*re-*, *-ive*, *-ate*, and *-ion*).

A word cannot be divided into morphemes just by sounding out its syllables. Some morphemes, like *apple*, have more than one syllable; others, like -s, are less than a syllable. A morpheme is a form (a sequence of sounds) with a recognizable meaning. Knowing a word’s early history, or **etymology**, may be useful in dividing it into morphemes, but the decisive factor is the form-meaning link.

A morpheme may, however, have more than one pronunciation or spelling. For example, the regular noun plural ending has two spellings (-s and -es) and three pronunciations (an s-sound as in *backs*, a z-sound as in *bags*, and a vowel plus z-sound as in *batches*). Each spoken variation is called an **allomorph** of the plural morpheme. Similarly, when the morpheme -ate is followed by -ion (as in *activate-ion*), the t of -ate combines with the i of -ion as the sound “sh” (so we might spell the word “activashon”). Such allomorphic variation is typical of the morphemes of English, even though the spelling does not represent it.

Morphemes can also be classified as **base morphemes** and affixes. An affix is a bound morpheme that is added to a base morpheme, either a prefix (such as *re-*) or a suffix (such as -s, -ive, -ate, and -ion). Most base morphemes are free (such as

apple and *act*), but some are bound (such as the *insul-* of *insulate*). A word that has two or more bases (such as *applejack*) is called a **compound**.

A linguistic sign may be word-sized or smaller—a free or a bound morpheme. But it may also be larger than a word. An **idiom** is a combination of words whose meaning cannot be predicted from its constituent parts. One kind of idiom is the combination of a verb with an adverb, a preposition, or both—for instance, *turn on* (a light), *call up* (on the telephone), *take over* (a business), *ask for* (a job), *come down with* (an illness), and *go back on* (a promise). Such an expression is a single semantic unit: to *go back on* is to ‘abandon’ a promise. But from the standpoint of grammar, several independent words are involved.

LANGUAGE AS VOCAL

Language is a system that can be expressed in many ways—by the marks on paper or a computer screen that we call writing, by hand signals and gestures as in sign language, by colored lights or moving flags as in semaphore, and by electronic clicks as in old-fashioned telegraphy. However, the signs of language—its words and morphemes—are basically vocal, or **oral-aural**, being sounds produced by the mouth and received by the ear. If human communication had developed primarily as a system of gestures (like the sign language of the deaf), it would have been quite different from what it is. Because sounds follow one another sequentially in time, language has a one-dimensional quality (like the letters we use to represent it in writing), whereas gestures can fill the three dimensions of space as well as the fourth dimension of time. The ears can hear sounds coming from any direction, but the eyes can see gestures made only in front of them. The ears can hear through physical barriers, such as walls, which the eyes cannot see through. Speech has both advantages and disadvantages in comparison with gestures; but on the whole, it is undoubtedly superior, as its evolutionary survival demonstrates.

WRITING AND SPEECH

Because writing has become so important in our culture, we sometimes think of it as more real than speech. A little thought, however, will show why speech is primary and writing secondary to language. Human beings have been writing (as far as we can tell from the surviving evidence) for at least 5000 years; but they have been talking for much longer, doubtless ever since they were fully human. When writing developed, it was derived from and represented speech, albeit imperfectly (see Chapter 3). Even today there are spoken languages that have no written form. Furthermore, we learn to talk long before we learn to write; any human child without physical or mental limitations will learn to talk, and most human beings cannot be prevented from doing so. It is as though we were “programmed” to acquire language in the form of speech. On the other hand, it takes a special effort to learn to write. In the past, many intelligent and useful members of society did not acquire that skill, and even today many who speak languages with writing systems never learn to read or write, while some who learn the rudiments of those skills do so only imperfectly.

To affirm the primacy of speech over writing is not, however, to disparage the latter. If speaking makes us human, writing makes us civilized. Writing has some

advantages over speech. For example, it is more permanent, thus making possible the records that any civilization must have. Writing is also capable of easily making some distinctions that speech can make only with difficulty. We can, for example, indicate certain types of pauses more clearly by the spaces that we leave between words when we write than we ordinarily are able to do when we speak. *Grade A* may well be heard as *gray day*, but there is no mistaking the one phrase for the other in writing.

Similarly, the comma distinguishes “a pretty, hot day” from “a pretty hot day” more clearly than these phrases are often distinguished in actual speech. But the question mark does not distinguish between “Why did you do it?” (I didn’t hear you the first time you told me), with rising pitch at the end, and “Why did you do it?” (You didn’t tell me), with falling terminal pitch. Nor can we show in writing the difference between *sound quality* ‘tone’ (as in “The sound quality of the recording was excellent”) and *sound quality* ‘good grade’ (as in “The materials were of sound quality”)—a difference that we signal very easily in speech by strongly stressing *sound* in the first sentence and the first syllable of *quality* in the second. *Incense* ‘enrage’ and *incense* ‘aromatic substance for burning’ are likewise sharply differentiated in speech by the position of the stress, as *sewer* ‘conduit’ and *sewer* ‘one who sews’ are differentiated by vowel quality. In writing we can distinguish those words only in context.

Words that are pronounced alike are called **homophones**. They may be spelled the same, such as *bear* ‘carry’ and *bear* ‘animal,’ or they may be distinguished in spelling, such as *bare* ‘naked’ and either of the *bear* words. Words that are written alike are called **homographs**. They may also be pronounced the same, such as the two *bear* words or *tear* ‘to rip’ and *tear* ‘spree’ (as in “He went on a tear”), or they may be distinguished in pronunciation, such as *tear* ‘a drop from the eye’ and either of the other two *tear* words. **Homonym** is a term that covers either homophones or homographs, that is, a word either pronounced or spelled like another, such as all *bear/bare* and *tear* words.

Homophones are the basis of puns, as in childish jokes about “a bear behind” and “seven days without chocolate make one weak,” whose written forms resolve the ambiguity of their spoken forms. But William Shakespeare was by no means averse to this sort of thing: puns involving *tale* and *tail*, *whole* and *hole*, *hoar* and *whore*, and a good many other homophones (some, like *stale* and *steal*, no longer homophonous) occur rather frequently in the writings of our greatest poet.

The conventions of writing differ somewhat from those of ordinary speech. For instance, we ordinarily write *was not*, *do not*, and *would not*, although we usually say *wasn’t*, *don’t*, and *wouldn’t*. Furthermore, our choice of words is likely to be different in writing and in everyday speech. But these are stylistic matters, as is also the fact that writing tends to be somewhat more conservative than speech.

Representing the spellings of one language by those of another is **transliteration**, which must not be confused with **translation**, the interpretation of one language by another. Greek $\pi\upsilon\rho$ can be transliterated *pyr*, as in *pyromaniac*, or translated *fire*, as in *firebug*. One language can be written in several **orthographies** (or writing systems). When the president of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Pasha (later called Kemal Atatürk), in 1928 substituted the Roman alphabet for the Arabic in writing Turkish, the Turkish

language changed no more than time changed when he introduced the Gregorian calendar in his country to replace the Islamic lunar one used earlier.

GESTURES AND SPEECH

Such specialized gestures as the indifferent shrug of the shoulders, the admonitory shaking of the finger, the lifting up of the hand in greeting and the waving of it in parting, the widening of the eyes in astonishment, the scornful lifting of the brows, the approving nod, and the disapproving sideways shaking of the head—all these need not accompany speech at all; they themselves communicate. Indeed, there is some reason to think that gestures are older than spoken language and are the matrix out of which it developed. Like language itself, such gestures vary in use and meaning from one culture to another. In India, a sideways wagging of the head indicates that the head-wagger understands what another person is saying. When gestures accompany speech, they may be more or less unconscious, like the crossed arms of a person talking with another, indicating a lack of openness to the other's ideas. The study of such communicative body movements is known as **kinesics**.

Our various tones of voice—the drawl, the sneer, the shout, the whimper, the simper, and the like—also play a part in communication (which we recognize when we say, “I didn’t mind what he said, I just didn’t like the way he said it”). The tones and gestures that accompany speech are not language, but rather parallel systems of communication called **paralanguage**. Other vocalizations that are communicative, like laughing, crying, groaning, and yelping, usually do not accompany speech as tones of voice do, though they may come before or after it.

LANGUAGE AS CONVENTIONAL

Writing is obviously **conventional** because we can represent the same language by more than one writing system. Japanese, for example, is written with kanji (ideographs representing whole words), with either of two syllabaries (writing systems that present each syllable with a separate symbol), or with the letters of the Roman alphabet. Similarly, we could by general agreement reform English spelling (soe dhat, for egzamppul, wee spelt it liek dhis). We can change the conventions of our writing system merely by agreeing to do so.

Although it is not so obvious, speech is also conventional. To be sure, all languages share certain natural, inherent, or universal features. The human vocal apparatus (lips, teeth, tongue, and so forth) makes it inevitable that human languages have only a limited range of sounds. Likewise, since all of us live in the same universe and perceive our universe through the same senses with more or less the same basic mental equipment, it is hardly surprising that we should find it necessary to talk about more or less the same things in more or less similar ways.

Nevertheless, the world’s many languages are conventional and generally **arbitrary**; that is to say, there is usually no connection between the sounds we make and the phenomena of life. A comparatively small number of **echoic words** imitate, more or less closely, other sounds. *Bow-wow* seems to English speakers to

be a fairly accurate imitation of the sound made by a dog and therefore not to be wholly arbitrary, but it is highly doubtful that a dog would agree, particularly a French dog, which says *gnaf-gnaf*, or a German one, which says *wau-wau*, or a Japanese one, which says *wung-wung*. In Norway cows do not say “moo” but *mmmøøø*, sheep do not say “baa” but *mæ*, and pigs do not say “oink” but *nøff-nøff*. Norwegian hens very sensibly say *klukk-klukk*, though doubtless with a heavy Norwegian accent. The process of echoing such sounds (also called **onomatopoeia**) is conventional.

Most people assume that their language is the best—and so it is for them, because they mastered it well enough for their own purposes so long ago that they cannot remember when or how. It seems to them more logical and sensible, more *natural*, than the way others talk. But there is nothing really natural about any language, since all these highly systematized and conventionalized methods of human communication must be acquired. There is, for instance, nothing natural in our use of *is* in such a sentence as “The woman is busy.” The utterance can be made just as effectively without that verb, and some languages do get along perfectly well without it. This use of the verb *to be* was, as a matter of fact, late in developing and never developed in Russian.

To the speaker of Russian it is more “natural” to say “Zhenshchina zanyata”—literally, “Woman busy”—which sounds to our ears so much like baby talk that the unsophisticated speaker of English might well (though quite wrongly) conclude that Russian is a childish tongue. The system of Russian also manages to struggle along without the **definite article** *the*. As a matter of fact, the speaker of Russian never misses it—nor should we if it had not become conventional with us.

To a naive speaker of English, calling the organ of sight *eye* may seem perfectly natural, and those who call it anything else—like the Germans, who call it *Auge*, the Russians, who call it *glaz*, or the Japanese, who call it *me*—are likely to be regarded as unfortunate because they do not speak languages in which things are properly named. The fact is, however, that *eye*, which we pronounce exactly like *I* (a fact that might be cited against it by a foreign speaker), is the name of the organ only in present-day English. It has not always been so. Londoners of the fourteenth century pronounced the word with two syllables, something like “ee-eh.” If we chose to go back to King Alfred’s day in the late ninth century, we would find yet another form of the word from which Modern English *eye* developed. The Scots are not being quaint or perverse when they say “ee” for *eye*, as in Robert Burns’s poem “To a Mouse”:

Still thou art blest, compared wi’ me!
The present only toucheth thee:
But och! I backward cast my e’e,
On prospects drear!

The Scots form is merely a variant of the word—a perfectly legitimate pronunciation that happens not to occur in standard Modern English. Knowledge of such changes within a single language should dissipate the notion that any word is more appropriate than any other word, except in a purely chronological and social sense.

LANGUAGE CHANGE

Change is normal in language. Every language is constantly turning into something different, and when we hear a new word or a new pronunciation or use of an old word, we may be catching the early stages of a change. Change is natural because a language system is culturally transmitted. Like other conventional matters—such as fashions in clothing, hairstyles, cooking, entertainment, and government—language is constantly being revised. Language evolves more slowly than do some other cultural activities, but its change is continuous and inevitable.

There are three general causes of language change. First, words and sounds may affect neighboring words and sounds. For example, *sandwich* is often pronounced, not as the spelling suggests, but in ways that might be represented as “sanwich,” “sanwidge,” “samwidge,” or even “sammidge.” Such spellings look illiterate, but they represent perfectly normal, though informal, pronunciations that result from the position of a sound within the word. When nearby elements thus influence one another within the flow of speech, the result is called **syntagmatic change**.

Second, words and sounds may be affected by others that are not immediately present but with which they are associated. For example, the side of a ship on which it was laden (that is, loaded) was called the *ladeboard*, but its opposite, *starboard*, influenced a change in pronunciation to *larboard*. Then, because *larboard* was likely to be confused with *starboard* because of their similarity of sound, it was generally replaced by *port*. Such change is called **paradigmatic** or **associative change**.

Third, a language may change because of the influence of events in the world. New technologies like the World Wide Web require new forms like *google* ‘to search the Internet for information’ and *wiki* (as in *Wikipedia*) ‘a Website, database, or software for creating Web sites, especially collaborative ones,’ from the Hawaiian word for ‘fast.’ New forms of human behavior, however bizarre, require new terms like *suicide bomber*. New concepts in science require new terms like *transposon* ‘a transposable gene in DNA.’ In addition, new contacts with persons who use speechways different from our own may affect our pronunciation, vocabulary, and even grammar. **Social change** thus modifies speech.

The documented history of the English language begins about A.D. 700, with the oldest written records. We can reconstruct some of the prehistory before that time, to as early as about 4000 B.C., but the farther back in time we go, the less certain we can be about what the language was like. The history of our language is traditionally divided into three periods: **Old English**, from the earliest records (or from the Anglo-Saxon settlement of England around A.D. 450) to about 1100; **Middle English**, approximately from 1100 to 1500; and **Modern English**, since about 1500. The lines dividing the three periods are based on significant changes in the language about those times, but major cultural changes around 1100 and 1500 also contribute to our sense of new beginnings. These matters are treated in detail in Chapters 5 through 8.

THE NOTION OF LINGUISTIC CORRUPTION

A widely held notion resulting from a misunderstanding of change is that there are ideal forms of languages, thought of as “pure,” and that existing languages represent corruptions of earlier ideal ones. Thus, the Greek spoken today is supposed to

be a degraded form of Classical Greek rather than what it really is, a development of it. Since the Romance languages are developments of Latin, it would follow from this point of view that they also are corrupt, although this assumption is not usually made. Those who admire or profess to admire Latin literature sometimes suppose that a stage of perfection had been reached in Classical Latin and that every subsequent development in Latin was an irreparable deterioration. From this point of view, the late development of Latin spoken in the early Middle Ages (sometimes called Vulgar, or popular, Latin) is “bad” Latin, which, strange as it may seem, was ultimately to become “good” Italian, French, Spanish, and so on.

Because we hear so much about “pure” English, we might carefully examine this notion. When Captain Frederick Marryat, an English novelist, visited the United States in 1837–1838, he thought it “remarkable how very debased the language has become in a short period in America,” adding that “if their lower classes are more intelligible than ours, it is equally true that the higher classes do not speak the language so purely or so classically as it is spoken among the well-educated English.” Both statements are nonsense. The first is based on the captain’s apparent notion that the English language had reached a stage of perfection at the time English-speaking people first settled America. After this, presumably because of the innate depravity of those English settlers who brought their language to the New World, it had taken a steadily downward course, whatever that may mean. One wonders also precisely how Marryat knew what constituted “classical” or “pure” English. It is probable that he was merely attributing certain superior qualities to that type of English that he was accustomed to hear from persons of good social standing in the land of his birth and that he himself spoke. Any divergence was “debased”: “My speech is pure; thine, wherein it differs from mine, is corrupt.”

LANGUAGE VARIATION

In addition to its change through the years, at any given period of time a language exists in many varieties. Historical, or **diachronic**, variation is matched by contemporary, or **synchronic**, variation. The latter is of two kinds: dialects and registers.

A **dialect** is the variety of a language associated with a particular place (Boston or New Orleans), social level (standard or nonstandard), ethnic group (Jewish or African-American), sex (male or female), age grade (teenage or mature), and so on. Most of us have a normal way of using language that is an intersection of such dialects and that marks us as being, for example, a middle-aged, white, cultured, female Charlestonian of old family or a young, urban, working-class, male Hispanic from New York City. Some people have more than one such dialect personality; national politicians, for example, may use a Washingtonian government dialect when they are doing their job and a “down-home” dialect when they are interacting with their voters. Ultimately, each of us has a unique, personal way of using language, an **idiolect**, which identifies us for those who know us.

A **register** is the variety of a language used for a particular purpose: sermon language (which may have a distinctive rhythm and sentence melody and include words like *brethren* and *beloved*), restaurant-menu language (which is full of “tasty adjectives” like *garden-fresh* and *succulent*), telephone-conversation language (in which the speech of the secondary participant is full of *uh-huh*, *I see*, *yeah*, and

oh), postcard language (in which the subjects of sentences are frequently omitted: “Having a wonderful time. Wish you were here.”), and e-mail and instant-messaging language with abbreviations like *BTDT* (been there, done that), *CUL8ER* (see you later), *CYO* (see you online), and *LOL* (laughing out loud). Everyone uses several registers, and the more varied the circumstances under which we talk and write, the more registers we use.

The dialects we speak help to define who we are. They tell those who hear us where we come from, our social or ethnic identification, and other such intimate facts about us. The registers we use reflect the circumstances in which we are communicating. They indicate where we are speaking or writing, to whom, via what medium, about what subject, and for what purpose. Dialects and registers provide options—alternative ways of using language. And those options confront us with the question of what is the right or best alternative.

CORRECTNESS AND ACCEPTABILITY

The concept of an absolute and unwavering, presumably God-given standard of linguistic correctness (sometimes confused with “purity”) is widespread, even among the educated. Those who subscribe to this notion become greatly exercised over such matters as split infinitives, the “incorrect” position of *only*, and prepositions at the ends of sentences. All these supposed “errors” have been committed time and again by eminent writers and speakers, so that one wonders how those who condemn them know that they are bad. Robert Lowth, who wrote one of the most influential English grammars of the eighteenth century (*A Short Introduction to English Grammar*, 1762), was praised by one of his admirers for showing “the grammatical inaccuracies that have escaped the pens of our most distinguished writers.”

One would suppose that the language of “our most distinguished writers” would be good usage. But Lowth and his followers knew, or thought they knew, better; and their attitude survives to this day. This is not, of course, to deny that there are standards of usage, but only to suggest that standards must be based on the usage of speakers and writers of generally acknowledged excellence—quite a different thing from a subservience to the mandates of badly informed “authorities” who are guided by their own prejudices rather than by a study of the actual usage of educated and accomplished speakers and writers.

To talk about “correctness” in language implies that there is some abstract, absolute standard by which words and grammar can be judged; something is either “correct” or “incorrect”—and that’s all there is to that. But the facts of language are not so clean-cut. Instead, many students of usage today prefer to talk about **acceptability**, that is, the degree to which users of a language will judge an expression as OK or will let its use pass without noticing anything out of the ordinary. An acceptable expression is one that people do not object to, indeed do not even notice unless it is called to their attention.

Acceptability is not absolute, but is a matter of degree; one expression may be more or less acceptable than another. “If *I were* in your shoes” may be judged more acceptable than “If *I was* in your shoes,” but both are considerably more acceptable than “If *we was* in your shoes.” Moreover, acceptability is not abstract, but is related to some group of people whose response it reflects. Thus most

Americans pronounce the past-tense verb *ate* like *eight* and regard any other pronunciation as unacceptable. Many Britons, on the other hand, pronounce it as “ett” and find the American preference less acceptable. Acceptability is part of the convention of language use; in talking about it, we must always keep in mind “How acceptable?” and “To whom?”

LANGUAGE AS HUMAN

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, language is a specifically human activity. That statement, however, raises several questions. When and how did human beings acquire language? To what extent is language innate, and to what extent is it learned? How does human language differ from the communication systems of other creatures? We will look briefly at each of these questions.

THEORIES OF THE ORIGIN OF LANGUAGE

The ultimate origin of language is a matter of speculation since we have no real information about it. The earliest languages for which we have records are already in a high stage of development, and the same is true of languages spoken by technologically primitive peoples. The problem of how language began has tantalized philosophical minds, and many theories have been advanced, to which waggish scholars have given such fanciful names as the pooh-pooh theory, the bow-wow theory, the ding-dong theory, and the yo-he-ho theory. The nicknames indicate how seriously the theories need be taken: they are based, respectively, on the notions that language was in the beginning ejaculatory, or echoic (onomatopoeic), or characterized by a mystic appropriateness of sound to sense in contrast to being merely imitative, or made up of grunts and groans emitted in the course of group actions.

According to one theory, the early prelanguage of human beings was a mixture of gestures and sounds in which the gestures carried most of the meaning and the sounds were used chiefly to “punctuate” or amplify the gestures—just the reverse of our use of speech and hand signals. Eventually human physiology and behavior changed in several related ways. The human brain, which had been expanding in size, lateralized—that is, each half came to specialize in certain activities, and language ability was localized in the left hemisphere of most persons. As a consequence, “handedness” developed (right-handedness for those with left-hemisphere dominance), and there was greater manual specialization. As people had more things to do with their hands, they could use them less for communication and had to rely more on sounds. Therefore, increasingly complex forms of oral signals developed, and language as we know it evolved. The fact that we human beings alone have vocal language but share with our closest animal kin (the apes) an ability to learn complex gesture systems suggests that manual signs may have preceded language as a form of communication.

We cannot know how language really began; we can be sure only of its immense antiquity. However human beings started to talk, they did so long ago, and it was not until much later that they devised a system of making marks on wood, stone, or clay to represent what they said. Compared with language, writing is a newfangled invention, although certainly not less brilliant for being so.

INNATE LANGUAGE ABILITY

The acquisition of language would seem to be an arduous task. But it is a task that children all over the world seem not to mind in the least. Moreover, children in daily contact with a language other than their “home” language—that of their parents—readily learn to speak the other language with a native accent. After childhood, however, perhaps in the teen years, most people find it difficult to learn a new language. Young children seem to be genetically equipped with an ability to acquire language. But after a while, that automatic ability atrophies, and learning a new language becomes a chore.

To be sure, children of five or so have not acquired all of the words or grammatical constructions they will need as they grow up. But they have mastered the basics of the language they will speak for the rest of their lives. The immensity of that accomplishment can be appreciated by anyone who has learned a second language as an adult. It is clear that, although every particular language has to be learned, the ability to acquire and use language is a part of our genetic inheritance and operates most efficiently in our younger years.

DO BIRDS AND BEASTS REALLY TALK?

Some animals are physically just about as well equipped as humans to produce speech sounds, and some—certain birds, for instance—have in fact been taught to do so. But no other species makes use of a system of sounds even remotely resembling ours. Human language and **animal communication** are fundamentally different.

In the second half of the twentieth century, a trio of chimpanzees—Sarah, Lana, and Washoe—greatly modified our ideas about the linguistic abilities of our closest relatives in the animal kingdom. After several efforts to teach chimps to talk had ended in almost total failure, it was generally concluded that apes lack the cognitive ability to learn language. Some psychologists reasoned, however, that the main problem might be a simple anatomical limitation: human vocal organs are so different from the corresponding ones in apes that the animals cannot produce the sounds of human speech. If they have the mental, but not the physical, ability to talk, then they should be able to learn a language using a medium other than sound.

Sarah was taught to communicate by arranging plastic tokens of arbitrary color and shape. Each of the tokens, which were metal-backed and placed on a magnetized board, represented a word in the system, and groups of tokens corresponded to sentences. Sarah learned over a hundred tokens and could manage sentences of the complexity of “Sarah take banana if-then Mary no give chocolate Sarah” (that is, ‘If Sarah takes a banana, Mary won’t give Sarah any chocolate’). Lana also used word symbols, but hers were on a typewriter connected to a computer. She communicated with people, and they with her via the computer. Typed-out messages appeared on a screen and had to conform exactly to the rules of “word” order of the system Lana had been taught, if she was to get what she asked for (food, drink, companionship, and the like).

Washoe, in the most interesting of these efforts to teach animals a language, was schooled in a gesture language used by the deaf, American Sign Language.

Her remarkable success in learning to communicate with this quite natural and adaptable system has resulted in its being taught to a number of other chimpanzees and gorillas. The apes learn signs, use them appropriately, combine them meaningfully, and when occasion requires even invent new signs or combinations. For example, one of the apes made up the terms “candydrink” and “drinkfruit” to talk about watermelons.

The linguistic accomplishment of these apes is remarkable; nevertheless, it is a far cry from the fullness of a human language. The number of signs or tokens the ape learns, the complexity of the syntax with which those signs are combined, and the breadth of ideas that they represent are all far more restricted than in any human language. Moreover, human linguistic systems have been fundamentally shaped by the fact that they are expressed in sound. Vocalness of language is no mere incidental characteristic but rather is central to the nature of language. We must still say that only human beings have language in the full sense of that term.

LANGUAGE AS COMMUNICATION

The purpose of language is to communicate, whether with others by talking and writing or with ourselves by thinking. The relationship of language to thought has generated a great deal of speculation. At one extreme are those who believe that language merely clothes thought and that thought is quite independent of the language we use to express it. At the other extreme are those who believe that thought is merely suppressed language and that, when we are thinking, we are just talking under our breath. The truth is probably somewhere between those two extremes. Some, though not all, of the mental activities we identify as “thought” are linguistic in nature. It is certainly true that until we put our ideas into words they are likely to remain vague, inchoate, and uncertain. We may sometimes feel like the girl who, on being told to express her thoughts clearly, replied, “How can I know what I think until I hear what I say.”

If we think—at least some of the time—in language, then presumably the language we speak must influence the way we think about the world and perhaps even the way we perceive it. The idea that language has such influence and thus importance is called the **Whorf hypothesis** after the linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf.

Efforts have been made to test the hypothesis—for example, by giving to persons who spoke quite different languages a large number of chips, each of a different color. Those tested were told to sort the chips into piles so that each pile contained chips of similar color. Each person was allowed to make any number of piles. As might be predicted, the number of piles tended to correspond with the number of basic color terms in the language spoken by the sorter. In English we have eleven basic color terms (*red, pink, orange, brown, yellow, green, blue, purple, black, gray, and white*), so English speakers tend to sort color chips into eleven piles. If a language has only six basic color terms (corresponding, say, to our *red, yellow, green, blue, black, and white*), speakers of that language tend to cancel their perception of all other differences and sort color chips into those six piles. Pink is only a tint or light version of red. But because we have different basic terms for those two colors, they seem to us to be quite distinct colors; light

blue, light green, and light yellow, on the other hand, are just insignificant versions of the darker colors because we have no basic terms for them. Thus, how we think about and respond to colors is a function of how our language classifies them.

Though a relatively trivial matter, color terms illustrate that the way we react to the world corresponds to the way our language categorizes it. How many of our other assumptions are reflexes of our language? English, like many other languages, has historically used masculine forms (such as pronouns) for persons of either sex, as in “Everyone has to do his best.” Does such masculine language influence our attitudes toward the equality of the sexes? Because it may, today the generic use of masculine forms is widely avoided in favor of gender-neutral or inclusive language.

Another example is that in English every regular sentence has to have a subject and a verb; so we say things like “It’s raining” and “It’s time to go,” with the word *it* serving as subject, even though the meaning of that *it* is difficult to specify. Does the linguistic requirement for a subject and verb lead us to expect an actor or agent in every action, even though some things may happen without anyone making them happen? The implications of the Whorf hypothesis are far-reaching and of considerable philosophical importance, even though no way of confidently testing those implications seems possible.

OTHER CHARACTERISTICS OF LANGUAGE

An important aspect of language systems is that they are “open.” That is, a language is not a finite set of messages from which the speaker must choose. Instead, any speaker can use the resources of the language—its vocabulary and grammatical patterns—to make up new messages, sentences that no one has ever said before. Because a language is an **open system**, it can be used to talk about new things. Bees have a remarkable system of communication, using a sort of “dance” in the air, in which the patterns of a bee’s flight tell other members of the hive about food sources. However, all bees can communicate about is a nectar supply—its direction, distance, and abundance. As a consequence, a bee would make a very dull conversationalist.

Another aspect of the communicative function of language is that it can be displaced. That is, we can talk about things not present—about rain when the weather is dry, about taxes even when they are not being collected, and about a yeti even if no such creature exists. The characteristic of **displacement** means that human beings can abstract, lie, and talk about talk itself. Displaced language is a vehicle of memory and of imagination. A bee communicates with other bees about a nectar source only when it has just found such a source. Bees do not celebrate the delights of nectar by dancing for sheer pleasure. Human beings use language for many purposes quite unconnected with their immediate environment. Indeed, most language use is probably thus displaced.

Finally, an important characteristic is that language is not just utilitarian. One of the uses of language is for entertainment, high and low: for jokes, stories, puzzles, and poetry. From “knock-knock” jokes to *Paradise Lost*, speakers delight in language and in what can be done with it.

WHY STUDY THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH?

Language in general is an ability inherent in us. Specific languages such as English are systems that result from that ability. We can know the underlying ability only through studying the actual languages that are its expressions. Thus, one of the best reasons for studying languages is to find out about ourselves, about what makes us persons. And the best place to start such study is with our own language, the one that has nurtured our minds and formed our view of the world. A good approach to studying languages is the historical one. To understand how things are, it is often helpful and sometimes essential to know how they got to be that way. If we are psychologists who want to understand a person's behavior, we must know something about that person's origins and development. The same is true of a language.

Another reason for studying the history of English is that many of the irregularities in today's language are the remnants of earlier, quite regular patterns. For example, the highly irregular plurals of nouns like *man-men*, *mouse-mice*, *goose-geese*, and *ox-oxen* can be explained historically. So can the spelling of Modern English, which may seem chaotic, or at least unruly, to anyone who has had to struggle with it. The orthographic joke attributed to George Bernard Shaw, that in English *fish* might be spelled *ghoti* (*gh* as in *enough*, *o* as in *women*, and *ti* as in *nation*), has been repeated often, but the only way to understand the anomalies of our spelling is to study the history of our language.

The fact that the present-day pronunciation and meaning of *cupboard* do not much suggest a board for cups is also something we need history to explain. Why do we talk about *withstanding* a thing when we mean that we stand in opposition to it, rather than in company *with* it? If people are *unkempt*, can they also be *kempt*, and what does *kempt* mean? Is something wrong with the position of *secretly* in "She wanted to secretly finish writing her novel"? Is there any connection between *heal*, *whole*, *healthy*, *hale*, and *holy*? Knowing about the history of the language can help us to answer these and many similar questions. Knowledge of the history of English is no *nostrum* or *panacea* for curing all our linguistic ills (why do we call some medicines by those names?), but it can at least alleviate some of the symptoms.

Yet another reason for studying the history of English is that it can help us to understand the literature of earlier times. In his poem "The Eve of St. Agnes," John Keats describes the sculptured effigies on the tombs of a chapel on a cold winter evening:

The sculptur'd dead, on each side, seemed to freeze,
Emprison'd in black, purgatorial rails.

What image should Keats's description evoke with its reference to *rails*? Many a modern reader, taking a cue from the word *emprison'd*, has thought of the *rails* as railings or bars, perhaps a fence around the statues. But *rails* here is from an Old English word that meant 'garments' and refers to the shrouds or funeral garments in which the stone figures are clothed. Unless we are aware of such older usage, we are likely to be led badly astray in the picture we conjure up for these lines.

In the General Prologue to his *Canterbury Tales*, Geoffrey Chaucer, in describing an ideal knight, says: "His hors were goode." Did the knight have one horse or

more than one? *Hors* seems to be singular, but the verb *were* looks like a plural. The knight did indeed have several horses; in Chaucer's day *hors* was a word, like *deer* or *sheep*, that had a plural identical in form with its singular. It is a small point, but unless we know what a text means literally, we cannot appreciate it as literature.

In the remainder of this book, we will be concerned with some of what is known about the origins and the development of the English language—its sounds, writing, grammar, vocabulary, and uses through the centuries and around the world.

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